

Good Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport!

We're back to worshipping "in the flesh" this morning! I know we are all happy about that.... *and*, I will ask you to continue to wear your masks while we are together, except during our coffee hour after the service.

Does absence make the heart grow fonder, as the saying goes? I think so. We are made to want to be together in the flesh, and it has been so since the beginning of time (read the Bible for details!).... except for those times when we can't seem to get along with one another (read the Bible for details!). And that, my friends, is the *underlying* theme of this morning's text and reflection – discord and revenge. The *visible* theme in the text is forgiveness and reconciliation. We are a complex lot, yes? Each one of us has people in our lives who love us and also people who don't love us so much. I know this because I'm on both sides of that divide.... How we learn to cross that divide of animosity and land in a place of mutual affection and goodwill towards one another is a life long journey (read the Bible for details!).

Join me this morning "in the flesh," if you can and we'll meet downstairs in Leach Hall for worship and coffee hour. Next Sunday is known in the Christian tradition as "Transfiguration Sunday." It is the Sunday before the beginning of Lent on Sunday, March 6th. Ash Wednesday is March 2nd. I've not decided yet if we will have an Ash Wednesday Service. Much still depends on the fickle weather of early March!

Remember that we will have a memorial service for Fred Bagnall in the afternoon on Saturday, March 5th in our sanctuary.

As usual, I will send these "Sunday words," this morning's worship service and my sermon to my e-mail list of about 130 people this morning. If you know of anyone who would like to be on my mailing list, just let me know. I'll post my sermon for today on my Facebook page, freerangepastor, and on the church's Facebook page, thefederatedchurchofthomaston, later today....

Blessings and peace to each one this February morn..... Susan

"Come, draw near to me!"

A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston

Thomaston, Maine

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Scripture: Genesis 45:1-15

Before I read the text from Genesis for today which details our sacred brother Joseph's dramatic reunion with his brothers, the brothers whom he hasn't seen for twenty years, I want to summarize what led up to that scene. First, the brothers had sold their brother Joseph into slavery years before. We won't go into that part of the story this morning.... but "seeking to buy grain for their starving families, Joseph's brothers went to Egypt and came before the governor, who happened to be their brother Joseph. Why didn't they recognize him? He was the last person on earth they expected to see. Much time had gone by. Joseph was speaking Egyptian, and was dressed in fine clothing of a different culture. However, Joseph recognized them and played a few tricks to see if his [meanspirited] brothers really had changed over the years.

Finally, Joseph asked his entourage to leave the room. They he spoke Hebrew, revealing his identity to his brothers, who were shocked [so] that they could not speak through the entire ordeal. Only after Joseph told them his story and kissed them all (an important sign of forgiveness and reconciliation in those days) were they able to open their mouths.

Through this entire saga, we are reminded that reconciliation is enormously powerful, if also painful, difficult and awkward. But at times it is a vital necessity in the human journey, and obstacle that must be embraced before we can break through and move on."^[1]

So, here's the text for today from Genesis 45:1-15.....

Joseph could no longer restrain himself before all who were standing in attendance on him, so he cried, "Send everyone away from me!" so that no one else was there when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He gave voice to a loud wail, and the Egyptians heard – Pharaoh's palace heard! Joseph then said to his brothers, "I am Joseph – is my father still alive?" But his brothers were unable to answer him – they recoiled in fear of him.

Joseph then went on to say to his brothers, "**Come, draw near to me!**" so they drew near. He said, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold to Egypt; and now, don't be troubled, don't be angry because you sold me here, for it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. There have already been two years of famine in the land, and [there remain] five more years without plowing or harvesting. So God sent me ahead of you to assure your survival in the land, and to keep you alive for a great deliverance.

"So it's not you who sent me here but the God who made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord of all his household, a ruler of the whole land of Egypt. Hurry

back up to my father and say to him: ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me a lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay! You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near to me – you, your children, and your children’s children, your flocks and herds, and all that you own. I will sustain you there, for there remain five more years of famine – so that you and your household and all that you own are not impoverished.’ Look – you can see with your own eyes, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it’s my mouth speaking to you! Tell my father how they honor me in Egypt, and all that you have seen; hurry up and bring my father down to here!” He then fell weeping upon his brother Benjamin’s neck, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept with them; only after this could his brothers respond to him. Genesis 45:1-15

Will you pray with me. Storytelling God, we come to you this day focusing on the theme of forgiveness and preserving life. We come to learn from your first family today. They lived and loved and hated and forgave so long ago. Yet their stories are our stories. Their emotions are our emotions. Their misunderstandings and understandings are ours, too. May their lives enrich our lives even as we struggle to accept ourselves, our families and all our neighbors this day. Amen.

If you read the entire book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, you come upon just about every emotion and struggle that occur in family life. In the families of the Abraham and Sarah cycle of our sacred ancestry, we learn of all of it – the good, the bad, and the ugly of blood relations!

And so.... we come from a long line of families who have come through despair and hope, sibling jealousies and brotherly love, revenge and forgiveness. Sound familiar in your family?

Frederick Buechner writes of families, “A family is a web so delicately woven that it takes almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it’s woven of is as strong as anything on earth.”^[2]

Let’s admit it – families are fragile.

But back to our story from Genesis for today – Jacob’s offspring, Joseph, “oldest son of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel,” was loved “more than any other of his children.” (Gen 37:3) “One sign of this favoritism was the gift of a ‘long robe with sleeves’ (Gen 37:3), a style that suggested royalty. In the first verses of Genesis 37, Joseph’s actions are the focus. When the older brothers are described in verse 4, we learn they ‘hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.’ [Then] verses 5-11 recount how Joseph had dreams in which his brothers,

and even his father, bow down to him. When Joseph details these dreams to his brothers, the stage is set for the tense rivalry that fuels the events of this saga.

Joseph's brothers work as shepherds. One day Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. He catches up with them at Dotham, and the brothers seize the opportunity to be rid of 'this dreamer' (Gen 37:19). As Joseph approaches, they plan to kill him and tell their father he was killed by animals.

Reuben [one of the brothers], argues against murder, preferring that Joseph be left in 'a pit,' a hole dug by shepherds to capture rainwater. Verse 22 of Chapter 37 reports that Reuben planned to rescue Joseph later. [But] before Reuben can enact the rest of his plan, Joseph is sold to Ishmaelites – descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael – and taken to Egypt as a slave. The brothers tear Joseph's robe, smear it with animal blood, and take it home to Jacob, who goes into deep mourning for his beloved son."^[3]

This family saga sounds like something right out of *The National Enquirer*, doesn't it?

So Joseph works his way up the ladder of success in Egypt, being of special talent and passion, unbeknownst to his brothers who are still at home on the farm with father Jacob.

A famine comes upon the land and Joseph, having earned a special place in Pharaoh's service in Egypt, "is placed in charge of preparations for surviving this impending disaster, and rises to the rank of governor. Seeking to buy grain, ten of Jacob's sons [Joseph's brothers] go to Egypt. They plead their case to the governor, not recognizing Joseph. Joseph, however, does recognize them and plays a few tricks on them, perhaps to assess their honesty. As we enter the focus verses for today, some time has passed since the first meeting and all eleven brothers now stand before Joseph.

The movement toward reconciliation is filled with tender emotion. First, Joseph speaks to his brothers in Hebrew to reveal his identity, weeping. The brothers are asked to move 'closer,' crossing the boundary of space customarily kept around a ruler. Joseph tells of his life in the intervening years, and moves to embrace Benjamin, then to kiss all the brothers. Remember that the kiss was an important sign of forgiveness and reconciliation [in those times]. Joseph emphasizes that his survival has been part of God's plan. 'God sent me before you to preserve life' (Gen 45:6). Joseph describes his wise actions in Egypt as evidence of God's saving love. God intends to maintain the covenant made with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3),"^[4] made three generations prior to Joseph and his brothers.

Oh how much of this story rings true today – sibling rivalry, favored children given special privileges and extra doses of love the other children don't believe they receive, aging parents trying to do their best but getting caught in their own biases, misguided beliefs and lost opportunities. It's all so familiar, it's scary! It all happens in individual families, it happens in church families, it happens in community families, it happens in nations as part of the whole family of God.

Why is it that it's so hard for us to get along? Why is it that we'd rather think revenge and rivalry than regret and reconciliation? Why is it that we'd rather do combat with one another than come together in cooperation and consideration of those who don't believe and act just as we do? Any ideas? (get responses)

It seems to me we're all hungry – for “something,” for relationship, for God. We're all hungry and we have this deep-seated, though sometimes unnamed and unknown, fear there won't be enough to go around to satisfy our hunger – so we lash out at those who we believe don't have the same kind of hunger we have – maybe they're in a different political party, a different social group, a different ethnic group, a different religion.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann imagines Joseph saying, "I became aware that my life was more than the sum of my little fears, my little hates, and my little loves. My life is larger than I imagined, and I decided to embrace the largeness that is God's gift for my life." [51][11][SEP]

Unless you've chosen to cut yourself off from all news sources, you know our country and the nations of the world are in a sorry, sorry state right now – because of the covid pandemic, because of social, governmental and religious upheaval and animosity.... and because we are human, with all the frailties and faults that have come to us honestly from our sacred ancestors of long ago. No different than then, many of us are fighting with one another and generally not seeing eye to eye on much of anything.

Here's the hard question I leave with you today -- What will it take for us to reach the point when we can say to one another as Joseph says to his brothers, **“Come, draw near to me!”**

Let the people say, “Amen.”

Federated Church in Thomaston

United Church of Christ United Methodist Church

All Are Welcome

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Pastor Susan

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.
An asterisk (*) indicates where you are invited to stand.
Bold print indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude There is a Balm in Gilead -- spiritual, arr by Robert J. Hughes

Call to Worship

Pastor: Love motivates us to come together as a community. Come closer.

People: Love asks us to see beyond appearances. Come closer.

Pastor: Love encourages us to be open to surprises. Come closer.

People: Love invites us to let go of fears. Come closer.

All: Love holds the possibility of being known. Come closer. We are loved. Let us worship God who loves us unconditionally!

***Opening Hymn** "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come" 694 Blue Hymnal

A Responsive Reading "From the Fragmented World" (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Genesis 45:1-15

***Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

Message "Come, draw near to me!" Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** "When Love Is Found" 643 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory My Heart Ever Faithful -- J. S. Bach

***Doxology No. 95 Blue Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow....**

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn** "God of Grace and God of Glory" 577 Blue Hymnal

Benediction

Postlude Ancient of Days - based on the hymn tune by William Doane

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, February 27, 2022

Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, (37-43a)

Especially today, we hold in prayer the family and friends of Kathleen's nephew, Heath, who died last week from cancer.....

Especially today, we continue to hold in prayer the family and many friends of Fred Bagnall who died on January 28....

Especially today, we continue to hold in prayer the family and many friends of Muriel Pinkham who died in the very early morning hours of January 22....Dear Muriel, we love you..... rest in peace now and forever....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs among their members....And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters....And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....And add a prayer for Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, BJ Thomson & family of Mimi's Uncle Doug, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter.....

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email at freerangepastor@gmail.com to have her add or drop any names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sunday-2/27/22.....9:30 am: Worship Services

Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Tuna

The flowers this week are donated by Gerry and Mimi Zwick in loving memory of Muriel Pinkham.

Deacon for February, 2022: Jackie Harjula

Reminders for next Sunday, 2/27/22

Greeter/Usher: Doug Schroeder and Kurt Leidenroth

Coffee

Host:

Kinney

:

Lector: Margie

Flowers

Collection Total for Sunday, January 2, 2022:

Pledges - \$1715.00

Loose - \$ 136.00

Deacon's Sunday - \$ 14.73

Total - \$1865.73

The 2022 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

**Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ & United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

Sunday, February 20, 2022

*“In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred,
we have the privileged vocation to be living sign of a love
that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.”*

✍ Henri Nouwen

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To contact the pastor via e-mail: freerangepastor@gmail.com

WiFi password is #1Church

^[1]*The Whole People of God, Weekly Worship Resources*, for August 18, 2002, p. 53.

^[2]Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, quoted in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, August 7, 2011, p. 75.

^[3]*Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, August 7, 2011, p. 72.

^[4]*Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, August 14, 2011, p. 80.

^[5]Quoted by Kate Huey of the UCC in a commentary on this passage for Sunday, August 14, 2011.